On participation. Zooming out and zooming in a central educational construct

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Abstract

The paper explores the construct of «participation», critically discussing various theoretical perspectives to approach it. Specifically, the article considers two different yet interrelated levels of analysis: the macro-level of international policies and the micro-level of everyday social interaction. First, the study considers international policies on children's participatory rights and presents a milieu of studies that variously discussed and assessed them. Second, it illustrates how macro-level policies are re-negotiated at the micro-level of participants' social interactions. Specifically, a review of previous literature shows that children's participation is also constructed in practice. This appraisal is instrumental to underline the construct's pedagogical relevance and discuss the analyst's positioning. Regarding the latter, in the discussion, it is argued that analysts need to be aware of the multifaceted character of the construct of participation to avoid a restricted analytical gaze on this phenomenon.

1. Introduction

The construct of «participation» is one of the most used and debated in the social sciences. Contemporary academia has elevated it to a fundamental analytical focus, connecting it to central concerns such as human rights and democracy. But what are we talking about when we analyze children's «participation» in our society? Which are the legitimate ways of approaching this construct within the scientific community?

The possible definitions of the construct of «participation» are multifarious and regard various analytical levels (see below). This plethora of different definitions and levels of analysis often impedes a clear understanding of what is meant by this analytical construct. As a result, «participation» has become a sort of buzzword which has been criticized for its loose epistemology and lack of a clear operational definition, falling short of offering a solid enough theoretical foundation to create a plan for children's engagement (Theis, 2010). There is an ongoing debate about the proper level of importance to give participation from a practical and human rights perspective, as well as whether it should be considered an «end», a «means» of promoting and preserving human rights, or both (Biemmi and Macinai, 2020; Biffi, 2018; Montà, 2023; Lansdown, 2001).

Within this contentious theoretical landscape, this paper tries to make sense of this social construct by critically reviewing some major approaches to the concept and by highlighting two different «levels» at which it can be considered. These two interrelated levels can be roughly brought back to the distinction between a micro and a macro perspective on social phenomena (Alexander et al., 1987), which in turn bears on the dichotomy between agency and structure (Giddens, 1984).

First, the article «zooms out» by considering participation as a theoretical construct that informs and can be traced in various policies at the national and international levels (section 3). This section focuses on the *structural* features of our society, in terms of policies and ideologies that influence and shape people's participatory rights at the macro-level.

Second, the article «zooms in» by considering how participation is also a relevant aspect of children's everyday social interactions (section 4). The possibility to meaningfully participate in the community's social life is also co-constructed *in practice,* i.e., through a variety of verbal, embodied, and material means of expression. In the discussion, the interrelations between these two analytical levels are critically discussed and the implications for the analyst's professional practice are briefly outlined.

The article has two main aims. First, it aims to illustrate different approaches to the concept of participation and to underline how they bear on each other. Second, it aims to highlight the relevance of this critical appraisal in relation to the analyst's awareness and analytical choices.

2. Dichotomies: agency/structure and micro/macro

To tackle the concept of «participation», we might start with a brief review of the dualism that contrasts *structure* and *agency* (Giddens, 1984). This dualism

accounts for humans' ability to agentively act within the boundaries set by a specific socio-cultural and material environment. Specifically, the notion of *structure* refers to the array of «durable» entities — such as ideologies, policies, values, norms, bodies of expert/lay knowledge, but also objects, architectures, and institutions — that shape and constrain human social behavior. These structural features have an impact on how individuals act in their everyday social life: for example, a school policy that prescribes that the children must remain seated at their desks during the break will constrain children's behavior (i.e., it will allow specific actions while prohibiting others).

Although these structural features are to a certain degree resistant to change, they are in no way immutable: social actors are actively involved in the continuous ratification and transformation of these structural premises, i.e., they are agentive subjects. The concept of *agency* refers to the ability of human beings (or other actants) to make use of the resources of a specific socio-material environment to pursue specific goals (Duranti, 2004). Going back to the previous example, a school policy can be complied with, enforced, changed, or resisted. For instance, during the break children could find ingenious ways to circumvent the school policy in order to chat close to one another. Therefore, the relation between structural socio-cultural entities and individuals' everyday praxis is *recursive:* «structure» influences and constrains everyday praxis, which can in turn reproduce and transform the structural features of its environment on an ongoing basis (Caronia and Nasi, 2022).

The agency/structure dualism is often bound to another fruitful dichotomy in the social sciences, namely the dichotomy between the *micro* and the *macro* (Alexander et al., 1987). In this paper, we label as «micro» the level of individuals' face-to-face social interaction, whereas we understand as «macro» the level of policies, ideologies, and discourses at the national and European level. Notably, the notion of «structure» often refers to policies and ideologies that can be observed and analyzed at the *macro* level: they usually transcend a specific local context and influence whole communities. This is the case with national and international *policies,* which are part of the (macro-level) structure that enables and constrains individuals' (micro-level) *practices* by establishing the boundaries of acceptable and required behavior in a certain context.

As mentioned above, these dichotomies are relevant to the construct of *participation:* individuals' active participation in the social life of the community is bound to both the macro level of national and European policies *and* the micro level of face-to-face social interaction.

3. Zooming out: children's participation in policies

The idea of children's participation is frequently linked with article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), even though the concept is not explicitly included in the Convention. This connection

is made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in General Comment No. 12 (2009). Participation is defined as follows:

> A widespread practice has emerged in recent years, which has been broadly conceptualized as «participation», although this term itself does not appear in the text of article 12. This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.

The meanings of participation are clarified by this definition. First, it is a practice rather than a theoretical idea; it is a process, which implies it is not linear but rather recursive. Specific traits apply to the process. It suggests information sharing. If a person does not have the required information, they are unable to participate. Second, it involves dialogical processes, which by nature take conflict and the control of power dynamics into consideration. Third, it involves both adults and children. Finally, it is a learning experience: children need to understand how their opinions and those of adults are considered when shaping outcomes in such processes. This final factor informs us that engagement must result in some sort of influence.

With the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children as a social category entered the «inner circle» of policymaking. Since then, there has been an increasing emphasis on and dedication to this social category. One of the most detailed accounts of child rights legislation is the 2010 Belgian EU Presidency report titled *The European and International Policy Agendas on Children, Youth, and Children's Rights,* which sought to provide a summary of the policy agendas for children and youth at the European and international levels. In 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 the publication was updated.

The primary policy objectives advanced by the EU, the Council of Europe (CoE), and the United Nations (UN) to influence national government policies are listed in these publications. Notably, these macro-level policies gain significance in relation to their «reception». Without changes in how they are viewed or what actions governments contemplate in connection to them, issues within policy agendas seldom gain or lose significance (Baumgartner et al., 2006). Major (policy) change, according to John W. Kingdon (1995), happens when issues, proposals, and politics come together within a «window of opportunity» that simultaneously focuses attention on the issue and the solution (Baumgartner, Greeen-Pedersen, and Jones, 2006, p. 961).

In this regard, policy agendas can be supported by pedagogical presumptions regarding the sociocultural idea of childhood as a category (Becchi, 1994) and the spaces of involvement given to children in flesh and blood (Biffi, 2018; Macinai, 2013). The underlying assumption in these efforts is that policy goals underpinned by children's rights principles can influence what a child can accomplish and be in a particular community (Alessandrini, 2014; Bell and Stevenson, 2006). Thus, understanding how child participation is defined in policy documents is crucial

because the values and ideas they transmit form the political foundation for the construction of micro-pedagogical learning experiences that involve both children and adults (Bertolini, 2003).

Setting out from this recognition, the phenomenon of child participation and the related policies have been extensively discussed in the literature. Since the UN Convention of 1989, scholars proposed a dozen models to explain the meaning of public forms of child participation (Hussey, 2017, 2019), examining its advantages and drawbacks (Bruyere, 2010; Hart, 1992; Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood, 2011; White, 1996), or discussing it from a theoretical (Kay and Tisdall, 2010; Theis, 2010) and empirical perspective (among others, Austin, 2010). However, a thorough framework that clarifies its contents or provides a foundation for its understanding is still absent (Clark, Biggeri, and Frediani, 2019; Malone and Hartung, 2010). This fuzziness also emerges from an analysis of the international policies on children's participatory rights. As written elsewhere (Montà, 2021), when analyzing the meanings of «child participation» in the latest (2010-2018) international and European policies on children's rights, several complexities and ambiguities emerge.

Child participation is viewed as crucial to the development of society and the fulfilment of human rights, as it is constructed as a specific dimension of children's fundamental rights and as essential to accessing protection and provision rights. However, policy statements do not suggest many concrete measures and actions to foster children's participation, and the concept of childhood moves between children being defined as «resourceful citizens» (UN General Assembly, 2002, par. 7.4) to being considered a vulnerable group.

Moreover, these documents have been written by adults and, due to their length and technical language, are inaccessible to children themselves. Because of the ambiguity and complexity with which the constructs of «childhood» and «child participation» are described, children are often impeded in their ability to make their own decisions (Day et al., 2015).

However, things may be changing. A «new window of opportunity» may be opening with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child. It is one of the major policy initiatives presented by the European Commission to better protect all children, help them realize their rights and put them at the center of EU policies. Notably, this document is the result of multiple consultations with citizens, stakeholders and, most importantly, with more than 10,000 children. The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child was developed *with* children and *for* children: a child-friendly version of the strategy was created, presenting the information in a way that is understandable for younger readers.

Children helped co-design the strategy, as they were consulted on the language, images and examples used in the brochures. In addition, the child-friendly version of the strategy is accessible to visually impaired readers and can be consulted with assistive devices and technologies. This policy does not only define the construct of child participation, but it was also constructed thanks to children's active participation, showing how the micro and macro levels coexist and might reciprocally

impact on each other. However, it must be stressed that the «child-friendly» policy (and we could question the meanings of child-friendly) comes after the «adult» version, although the document concerns primarily children and their rights.

Apart from the role of (adult and young) citizens in the drafting of specific policies, there is another crucial milieu in which citizens can influence and steer the impact of macro-level policies: people can re-negotiate and re-interpret them during their everyday social interactions.

4. Zooming in: children's participation in social interaction

The concept of participation can also be approached from the micro-perspective of face-to-face interaction. In the first place, individuals participate to the social life of a community by concretely interacting with other people. To consider the practices and resources through which participants manage their participation-in-interaction, the theoretical framework advanced by Marjorie and Charles Goodwin might be relevant. These two authors defined participation as «actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of talk» (Goodwin and Goodwin, 2004). The focus is thus on individuals' *concrete displays* of being involved in a certain activity (e.g., answering a question, looking at another person who is currently speaking).

Building on the work of Erving Goffman (1981), the Goodwins also used the concept of *participation framework* to highlight the disparate ways of participating that individuals might adopt when interacting with each other (De León, 2012). Through various verbal and non-verbal resources, individuals might construct specific co-present persons as ratified participants or exclude them from the ongoing interaction (e.g., with a third person reference to talk about them). Apart from the issue of ratified vs. non-ratified participants, meaningful participation is also bound to the social role that is ascribed to somebody: for instance, a child might participate in pretend play, but in a constant subordinate position (e.g., impersonating a baby that is not born yet; Sheldon, 1996). Thus, the possibility to meaningfully participate in a specific activity regards both the local participation framework *and* participants' social relationship.

Within this theoretical framework, several scholars have convincingly illustrated the centrality of social interaction for the management of individuals' participatory rights in our society. For example, Simon Magnusson analyzed the meetings of a participatory democracy project in Sweden (Magnusson, forthcoming). The project aimed to involve 14- to 15-year-olds in the construction of a «vision» for the future of the country. However, the micro analysis of participants' interaction during the meetings shows that adults constantly maintained control, establishing the appropriate ways of participating in that context: they assessed which contributions were relevant and appropriate, they interrupted the adolescents and reformulated their words, they spoke for most of the time and displayed their being more knowledgeable than the adolescents. Within a «structural» program

that was aimed at enhancing teenagers' participation, *adults* held the power to decide who participates, when, and how. This could be only seen though a detailed analysis of the social interactions that took place during the meetings.

In another article, Ruey-Ying Liu analyzed parent-child interactions in several families in Taiwan and the United States (Liu, 2022). The author illustrated how adults dealt with children's delays in responding to a question: contravening the usual preference for progressivity in interaction (Stivers and Robinson, 2006), parents prioritized children's participation by waiting longer, by asking questions multiple times, and by avoiding correcting children's problematic answers. Thereby, parents locally promoted children's rights and obligations to participate, socializing them into active responsive participation. Again, children's participatory rights were negotiated (and in this case, «accorded») at the level of participants' local interactions.

Eventually, a relevant stream of research has considered the issue of «participation» in relation to children with developmental impairments (see among others Ochs, Solomon, and Sterponi, 2005). For example, these studies have shown how children with autism might deploy various multimodal resources to display the fact of being participating in the current activity; in this regard, only a detailed analysis of the verbal, embodied, and material resources that individuals deploy at the micro level permits to highlight the participatory strategies of these children in front of the adult. In other words, a micro-perspective on social interaction allows the analyst to consider *apparently* non-participating (e.g., non-speaking) children, considering the different ways of participating that pertain to each individual and his/her competences.

Clearly, this micro-analytical approach is not devoid of potential problems, as it risks neglecting the diachronicity of the social constructs that it considers (e.g., «participation», or «development», which undoubtedly entail a diachronic dimension that transcends single instances of social interaction). Nevertheless, this approach allows the analyst to highlight the various opportunities for participation that children and adults co-create during their local interactions.

As illustrated in this section, «participation» is not only a matter of macro-level policies, as the possibility of children and youth to participate to the social life of our society is also constructed and disputed in interaction. By managing the local participation framework and participants' social roles, individuals re-interpret and possibly resist broader policies and ideologies regarding people's participatory rights.

5. Concluding discussion

Fred Stein, one of the great photographers of the twentieth century, devoted his late work to the city of New York, where he had fled from Nazi-occupied Europe. His work is admirably close to people's everyday life, as he often captured ordinary people dealing with their most mundane concerns (e.g., some children playing with a broken pipe on the street). At the same time, Stein also represented

the «stage» within which these people acted: in several pictures he represented the city from afar, offering for example a panoramic view of its streets and skyscrapers (Stein's photos are freely accessible on the official website of his archive, www. fredstein.com) (consulted on 27 October 2023). In this regard, Stein's camera lenses followed a precise and recurrent oscillation: they zoomed out and zoomed in a certain object of representation, New York City.

In this paper, we tried to adopt a similar strategy (unfortunately, without Stein's talent and grace): we zoomed out and zoomed in a specific construct, namely that of (children's) *participation.* In a theoretical landscape that is characterized by a multiplicity of possible definitions, this paper highlighted two interrelated level of analysis. First, it illustrated some of the features of participatory policies at the macro level. Second, it underlined the relevance of participants' negotiation of their participatory rights at the micro-level of social interaction.

The appraisal in this study can help approach the construct of participation with a certain analytical awareness: knowledge of the different ways of approaching the construct (and an awareness of their epistemological and methodological implications) can broaden our understanding of the interplay of micro and macro features that characterizes social phenomena (such as participation and children's participatory rights). As a matter of fact, these two levels of analysis bear on each other, and analysts should be aware of their recursive relationship to avoid a «restricted analytical geography» (Goodwin, 2011).

For instance, the analysis of policies cannot disregard their actual implementation *in practice:* structural models of participation can help us design policies that favor children's active participation, but the crucial point is how they will be re-interpreted and transformed by children themselves. Conversely, the analysis of participants' social interaction cannot dismiss the broader context in which they take place. During the analysis of participants' local practices, the analyst will look for traces of broader discourses and policies, critically considering how they shape and influence participants' local choices.

The critical discussion of the different approaches to «participation» is also relevant from a pedagogical perspective, as this construct underpins a crucial pedagogical question: «What is a child able to learn to be and do in a given context?». If we adopt an educational approach based on active citizenship and democracy (Biesta, 2011), children's possibility to participate in the social life of our community is a crucial concern. Children become active and reflective citizens by participating in various ways and at different levels in the set of practices and activities that constitute our society. As adults, we must thus find ways to allow and possibly enhance children's active participation in formal, non-formal, and informal educational contexts. This promotion of children's participatory rights amount to acknowledging their role as *political subjects,* i.e., subjects that can concretely impact on decision-making processes (Biffi, 2020).

A thorough appraisal of the concrete measures that could favor children's participation would go beyond the scope of this article (among others, see Clark, 2017; Montà, 2023; Cekaite and Björk-Willén, 2018 on possible strategies). How-

ever, we argue that any strategy should necessarily take into account both the macro level (e.g., a policy that foresee «structural» spaces for children's participation in decision-making) and the micro level (e.g., allocating children the role of speakers and letting them «keep the floor» for extended turns of talk). As illustrated in this article, the possibility to participate and make a difference in decision-making regards both the macro-level of international policies and the micro-level of everyday social interaction. Therefore, the pedagogical relevance of the construct cannot be limited to one of these two interrelated levels and overlook the composite, multi-faceted character of children's participation in our communities.

Partecipazione. Prospettive macro- e micro-analitiche su un costrutto centrale in educazione

Sommario

L'articolo esplora il costrutto di «partecipazione» attraverso una disamina critica di diverse prospettive teoriche ed empiriche. In particolare, lo studio prende in considerazione due livelli di analisi distinti, ma correlati: il livello «macro» delle politiche (policies) *internazionali e il livello «micro» dell'interazione sociale faccia a faccia. In primo luogo, l'articolo presenta le politiche internazionali sulla partecipazione dei bambini e il filone di studi accademici che si è variamente occupato della loro analisi. In secondo luogo, l'articolo evidenzia come le politiche a livello macro vengano reinterpretate a livello micro durante le interazioni sociali di bambini e adulti. Nello specifico, l'analisi della letteratura mostra come il diritto alla partecipazione dei bambini venga anche costruito in pratica durante le attività quotidiane. Nella discussione si sottolinea la rilevanza pedagogica del costrutto, discutendo altresì il posizionamento del ricercatore. In relazione all'ultimo punto, l'articolo mette in rilievo la necessità di essere consapevoli del carattere multiforme del costrutto per evitare uno sguardo analitico ristretto sul fenomeno.*

Parole chiave
Bambini, partecipazione, diritti, agentività/struttura, micro/macro.

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